

Florentine Convent as Practiced Place: Cosimo de'Medici, Fra Angelico, and the Public Library of San Marco

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Abstract

By approaching the Observant Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence as a “practiced place,” this article considers the secular users of the convent’s library as mobile spectators that necessarily navigated the cloister and dormitory and, in so doing, recovers, for the first time, their embodied experience of the architectural pathway and the frescoed decoration along the way. To begin this process, the article rediscovers the original “public” for the library at San Marco and reconstructs the pathway through the convent that this secular audience once used. By considering the practice of the place, this article considers Fra Angelico’s extensive fresco decoration along this path as part of an integrated “humanist itinerary.” In this way, Angelico’s frescoes may be understood not only as the result of the social relationship between the mendicant artist and his merchant patron, but also, for the first time in art historical scholarship, as a direct means of visual communication with the convent’s previously unrecognized public audience and an indicator of their political and intellectual practices within the Florentine convent.

Keywords

Cosimo de'Medici, Fra Angelico, San Marco, humanism, Renaissance libraries, Renaissance art, Renaissance patronage, Council of Ferrara-Florence

Any study of merchant and mendicant relations in late medieval and early modern Europe must account for the lavish architectural and decorative building project at the Observant Dominican convent of San Marco, Florence, sponsored by the Florentine statesmen, merchant and patron of art, Cosimo de'Medici (1389-1464). In one of Cosimo’s earliest biographies, written by the fifteenth-century bookseller Vesapasiano da Bisticci, the merchant is portrayed as a man who turned to the patronage of

mendicant sites as a means to assuage his conflicted conscience. Vespasiano explains,

[Cosimo] had prickings of conscience that certain portions of his wealth—where it came from I cannot say—had not been righteously gained, and to remove this weight from his shoulders he held conference with Pope Eugenius, who was then in Florence, as to the load which lay on his conscience. Pope Eugenius had settled the Observantist Order in San Marco; but, as their lodgings there were inadequate, he remarked to Cosimo that, if he was bent on unburdening his soul, he might build a monastery.¹

According to Vespasiano, Cosimo accepted the pope's proposal, spent over forty thousand florins to rebuild the church and convent, and then continued to financially sponsor the Observant Dominican friars resident at the site for the next twenty-seven years until his death in 1464 (Fig. 1). This act presumably relieved Cosimo of his guilty banker's conscience, secured for him everlasting civic recognition of his good deeds in Florence through the visual manifestation of his largesse, and, more importantly, opened a place for him in heaven.

Nearly 500 years later, Ernst Gombrich initiated his seminal work, "The Early Medici as Patrons of Art," with Vespasiano's account.² Situating Cosimo de' Medici's individual strategies of art patronage within the larger framework of the familial patronage of the Medici throughout the course of the fifteenth century, Gombrich used the case of San Marco to demonstrate Cosimo's self-fashioning in the public eye. For Gombrich, Cosimo's financial support of the rebuilding and decoration of San Marco, as well as his funding of the Observant Dominicans' domestic needs, demonstrated his desire to go beyond contemporary standards for charitable works in Florence and to do so in such a way as to avoid drawing attention to the lavishness of his benefaction.³ Cosimo's selection of Fra Angelico to head the decoration of the San Marco complex aligns with this austere portrait,

¹ Vespasiano (da Bisticci), *Renaissance Princes, Popes and Prelates (The Vespasiano Memoirs: Lives of Illustrious Men of the XVth Century)*, trans. William George and Emily Waters (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 218–219.

² E.H. Gombrich, "The Early Medici as Patrons of Art," in *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1966), 35–57.

³ See A.D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), 162–170.



Figure 1. Exterior view of San Marco, Florence (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

since the artist was widely recognized even in his own day as particularly devoted to God and the mendicant way of life.⁴

Gombrich's analysis remains the dominant model for examinations of the Medici patronage of San Marco, despite significant scholarly additions to Cosimo's social and political biography as a whole.⁵ In the 1970s, Dale Kent's historical analysis of Medici strategies of political patronage and networking demonstrated that, in the decade before his exile from and triumphant return to Florence in 1434, Cosimo de' Medici was a calcu-

⁴ On Fra Angelico's decision to enter the Observant Dominican community, see Creighton Gilbert, "The Conversion of Fra Angelico," in *Scritti di Storia dell'Arte in onore di R. Salvini*, ed. C. De Benedictis (Florence: Sansoni, 1984), 281-287.

⁵ The bibliography on Medici patronage is too extensive to list in full here. For a list of particularly relevant sources that have led to my reformulation of Cosimo's role as a patron at San Marco, see Allie Terry, "Politics on the Cloister Walls: Fra Angelico and His Humanist Observers at San Marco," Ph.D. Dissertation (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 2005), 641-672.

lated and charismatic statesman who outwardly upheld the official governmental structure of Republican Florence while simultaneously undermining it through a systematic and effective application of social practices that ultimately positioned him as leader of the city in all but name.⁶ Kent's critical attention to the unofficial history of Florence—actions that took place on the street or in the home as opposed to the carefully documented accounts of official ceremony and circumstance—encouraged a reevaluation of the traditional approach to the ways in which power was formulated and expressed in the Quattrocento.

Yet, when Kent turned to an investigation of Cosimo's patronage of art in an influential monograph in 2000, she retracted her assertion that Cosimo was a "political animal," at least in the realm of his sponsorship of religious foundations, and instead reasserted Cosimo's role as a patron honoring God.⁷ In her analysis of Cosimo's association with San Marco, she evoked Vespasiano's reference to Cosimo's guilty conscience and claimed that "the political power of the Medici did not relate to the monastery's main concerns."⁸ San Marco, for Kent, should be seen as the manifestation of Cosimo's active piety and not as a strategy for the creation or sustenance of power through the manipulation of Florentine visual culture.⁹

Kent's interpretation of Cosimo's patronage at San Marco is based on the widely held art historical assumption that the convent and the nearly fifty paintings by Fra Angelico contained therein remained largely inaccessible to the public during Cosimo's lifetime. In this line of thinking, the imagery, even if rich in Medici symbolism, would have had little influence in shaping a favorable public opinion for Cosimo and his family since there was no public audience to view it. Rather, the convent and its images

⁶ Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence 1426–1434* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁷ In her preface, Kent acknowledges that her "skepticism concerning the reading of political messages about rulership in Cosimo's oeuvre may strike some readers as ironic." Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), x.

⁸ Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 132 and 149.

⁹ Kent defended her approach in "Charity and Power in Renaissance Florence: Surmounting Cynicism in Historiography," *Common Knowledge*, 9, no. 2 (2003), 254–272. For opposing views, see the reviews by Sharon T. Stocchia, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54 (2001), 1593–1595; Theodore K. Rabb, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (2002), 471–473; and Lauro Martines, *Times Literary Supplement*, January 12, 2001.

were created entirely for the benefit of the Observant Dominican residents at the site.

Certainly, the architecture and paintings of San Marco communicated directly to the Observant Dominicans. Fra Angelico himself was a member of the order at the time when he painted there in the late 1430s and 1440s, and his paintings have been justly shown to participate in the spiritual and ritual traditions of the religious community.¹⁰ However, the consistent assertion that the friars were the only possible audience for Michelozzo's architecture and Fra Angelico's images is unfounded. As this article illustrates, a group of highly ambitious intellectuals and lay-humanists also walked through the cloister and halls of San Marco, not to participate in the religious activities of the friars, but to use the library constructed by Michelozzo in the early 1440s (Fig. 2). Situated in the heart of the friars' dormitories, the library—considered the first public library in Italy—allowed the public to penetrate the cloistered walls of the convent and to participate in one of its most remarkable architectural spaces.¹¹

The rediscovery and examination of the fifteenth-century secular users of the library of San Marco challenges traditional assumptions regarding Cosimo's motivations for financing the Observant Dominican religious community. It opens up the analysis of Fra Angelico's imagery to an audience consisting of a larger social body with political motivations. Indeed, the users of the library of San Marco were part of an elite and influential group of individuals who viewed intellectual engagement as part of a civic responsibility in mid-century Florence. Their access to the most comprehensive collection of Greek and Latin manuscripts in Italy, held within the library of San Marco, was mediated by the personal intervention of Cosimo de' Medici. He used his financial patronage of San Marco to

¹⁰ William Hood's groundbreaking study on the relationship between Fra Angelico's frescoes painted at San Marco and the Observant Dominican behavioral practices at the convent has offered the most influential examination of the paintings within this socio-historical context to date. Working from the notion that San Marco was a cloistered institution that prohibited public access to the majority of Angelico's images, Hood argued that any understanding of the frescoes must begin and end with the ideological concerns of the Observant Dominican friars, who lived amongst and interacted with Angelico's paintings on a daily basis. William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

¹¹ This is the central focus of both my 2005 dissertation thesis and my book manuscript on the topic.



Figure 2. Interior view of Library of San Marco, *primo piano*, north corridor (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

portray his presence in the convent through both frescoed representations on the walls and his private chambers, which were located along the humanist path. The reception of Cosimo's image at San Marco by these secular users of the convent's spaces extends the political and social significance of his patronage to the larger Florentine public outside the convent's walls and arguably accounts for his extended support of the site.

This article seeks to recover the visual experience of the convent's secular navigators, those individuals with prominent social and political status who had access to the library in the mid-fifteenth century and who shaped its space. No one, until now, has attempted to understand Fra Angelico's images at San Marco from the perspective of a secular audience. This may be the result, in large part, of the lack of first-hand accounts of the lay-humanist reception and interpretation of the frescoed decoration in the convent. Yet, the textual archive is not the only way to access the historical performance of looking, even if it is most convenient. The humanists' movements through the convent may also be traced and unpacked,

offering a means to move beyond the archive and into their repertoire of performances, gestures and movement of embodied memory.¹²

Drawing on Michel de Certeau's distinction between place (*lieu*) and space (*espace*), I approach the architectural complex of San Marco as a "practiced place," that is, a space enacted by its users, to reevaluate the convent as a politicized site of Medici authority during Cosimo de' Medici's life.¹³ The users of the convent, including the Observant Dominican friars and the secular scholars *en route* to the library, transformed the physical "place" of San Marco into "space" by activating and practicing it.¹⁴ The scholars traveling to use the library were, in effect, mobile spectators: they made connections between the images and spaces that they traversed and understood the spatial relations between points of interest along the way. As such, it is crucial to account for the spatially-contingent meanings of the architecture and frescoes of San Marco—that is, to consider the perambulatory process by which these works were viewed.

To begin the process of practicing the place, I first consider the original users of the library at San Marco and describe the dynamic connections that each had to Cosimo and to the Florentine convent. I then reconstruct the pathway through the convent that this secular audience traveled to reach it in the mid-fifteenth century. Finally, I consider Fra Angelico's extensive fresco decoration along this path as part of a purposefully constructed "humanist itinerary" intended for intellectual consumption by the mobile spectators *en route* to the library. In this way, Angelico's decoration may be understood as more than a record of a social relationship between the mendicant artist and his merchant patron.¹⁵ The frescoes may also be understood as a direct means of visual communication between Cosimo and the convent's previously unrecognized secular audience and as an indicator of these viewers' political and intellectual practices within

¹² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984). For an analysis of the public space of Renaissance Florence as a "practiced place," see for example, Stephen J. Milner, "Florentine Piazza della Signoria as Practiced Place," in *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, eds. Roger Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83-103.

¹⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

¹⁵ This is a conscious play on Michael Baxandall's famous dictum that "a fifteenth-century painting was the deposit of a social relationship;" *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

the Florentine convent. As a place practiced by the library users, San Marco emerges as a site in which mobile spectators actualized the political possibilities offered by the decorative and architectural program. In this way, this article recuperates Cosimo as a political patron of art and architecture, even in the commission considered to be the quintessential expression of his understated largesse and personal piety.

The Library and Its “Public”

To reconstruct the secular experience of the convent of San Marco, it is first necessary to pinpoint which individuals had access to the library, how they traveled through the convent to reach it, and what they saw along the way. The user-base of the library was elite, extremely well educated, and dedicated to the political welfare of Florence. The library of San Marco was founded by a group of sixteen men, all trustees of Niccolò Niccoli's extensive manuscript collection, which he bequeathed to them with the goal of building a public site for their study and use.¹⁶ As Poggio Bracciolini emphasized in his funeral oration in Niccoli's honor, the manuscripts were of extreme benefit to the public good. He exclaimed, “what could be more splendid, more pleasing, more adapted to humanistic study, more useful to the commune, if a public library could be made, or contrived, capable of becoming a kind of excellent office of eloquence and of all the other good arts?”¹⁷ The men who collaborated to realize the San Marco library were active participants in elite intellectual and political communities in

¹⁶ Niccoli's last will and testament is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter “ASF”), *Protocolli Notarili* (Notarile Antecosimiano), Angiolo di Pietro, 683 (formerly A 670), ff. 337v-338v. The Latin document was published in entirety by Berthold L. Ullman and Philip A. Stadter in *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence. Niccolo Niccoli, Cosimo de' Medici and the library of San Marco* (Padua: Antenore, 1972), 292-295, then retranscribed and published with corrections in Eugenio Garin, “La Biblioteca di S. Marco,” in *La Chiesa e il Convento di San Marco di Firenze*, 2 vols. (Florence: Giunti, 1990), 1: 113-114. I have consulted all archival documents cited throughout this article and have transcribed them in Terry, “Politics on the Cloister Walls,” 258-302. On Niccoli's relationship with the trustees of his manuscript collection, see Terry, “Politics on the Cloister Walls,” 25-117.

¹⁷ Poggi Florentini, “Opere tertia in funere Nicolai Nicoli civis Florentini,” *Opera Omnia*, ed. R. Fubini, 4 vols. (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1964-9), 1: 276-277.

Florence.¹⁸ They were central figures in the movement to ensure the *studia humanitas* at the university, or Studio Fiorentino, and insisted on the good that learning brought to the *patria*. One of the San Marco library trustees, the humanist Chancellor Leonardo Bruni, boasted that learning was one of the primary achievements of the Republic, on par with its military feats.¹⁹ A public library containing every type of book in its most correct form and “for the use of every studious citizen” offered a space for learning, conversation and political engagement.²⁰

In April 1441, the trustees came into official agreement with the Observant Dominican friars of San Marco on the construction of a public library within their convent.²¹ Cosimo de’Medici would provide the necessary funds for every aspect of the building and upkeep of the library, the trustees would take turns in the management of the collection, and the friars would be responsible for the inventory and circulation of the manuscripts.²² The documents clearly state that control of the library rested completely in the hands of the trustees, and that they, and only they, were allowed to remove any of the manuscripts from the library or to give permission for its access by outsiders. Each year, the friars were to inventory the collection and, in the event that any text was missing from the library, they were responsible for providing a replacement within a year. The trustees reserved the right to remove the entire collection from the convent if they deemed the friars incompetent in their duties.

¹⁸ In 1437, the year of Niccoli’s death, the trustees included Poggio Bracciolini, Leonardo Bruni, Domenico Buonsegni, Niccolò Gori, Francesco Lapaccini, Carlo Marsuppini, Cosimo de’Medici, Lorenzo de’Medici, Nicola de’Medici, Filippo di ser Ugolino Pieruzzi, Franco Sacchetti, Paolo Toscanelli, Luigi Lapaccini, Gainnozzo Mannetti, Guglielmo Tanaglia and Ambrogio Traversari.

¹⁹ Leonardo Bruni, “*Laudatio urbis florentinae*,” 174.

²⁰ Garin, “La biblioteca di San Marco,” 82.

²¹ ASF, *Protocolli Notarili* (Notarile Antecosimiano), Angiolo di Pietro, (formerly A 681), ff. 25r-30r. The following paragraph is based on this document, which lays out the stipulations for the San Marco library.

²² In their groundbreaking study on the history and foundation of the library at San Marco, Berthold Ullman and Philip Stadter explained the placement of Niccoli’s collection of manuscripts at San Marco in economic terms since Niccoli died while in debt to Cosimo de’Medici. They claimed that “for Cosimo it was an extremely inexpensive way to furnish San Marco with an excellent library.” Ullman and Stadter, *The Public Library*, 12. Yet, as I argue below, the library was not intended for the Observant Dominicans, but rather for an elite public that worked in and for the city of Florence.

At the time of the official decision to build the library at San Marco in 1441, much construction and decoration remained to be done within the church and convent.²³ The monumental *Crucifixion* painted by Fra Angelico and his assistants within the Chapter Room on the ground floor was still incomplete and most of the dormitory cells on the *primo piano* were still in need of decoration.²⁴ The entire southern corridor of the dormitory was not erected until 1442, and in 1443, the year of the church's consecration, the decoration of the northern corridor was still unfinished. Thus, the fact that the library's audience was primarily secular was acknowledged well before Fra Angelico and his assistants fully formulated and realized the decorative program at the convent. The frescoes were made, at least in part, with the secular library users in mind.

A partial picture of the user-base of the library may be pieced together through fifteenth-century correspondence and biographies, although there was once much richer documentation on this group of lay scholars in the form of a library register that is no longer extant.²⁵ The most prominent secular presence at San Marco was Cosimo de' Medici. He used San Marco on a near daily basis and had a private cell in close proximity to the library on the *primo piano* of the convent.²⁶ He served as the primary patron of the library from 1441 until his death. During this time, he actively pursued and acquired new texts for the collection. The bookmaker Vespasiano da Bisticci was in close contact with Cosimo de' Medici and the friars of San Marco from the 1440s through the 1460s. During his many visits to the convent, Vespasiano formed a friendship with Fra Giuliano Lapaccini, who was the librarian of the San Marco collection, prior of San Marco,

²³ The actual commencement date of the construction on the library is unknown. Lorenzo Gori-Montanelli dates the construction to between 1442-1444; *Brunelleschi e Michelozzo* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1957), 82ff. Eugenio Garin suggests that the building began as early as April 1441, with its completion in 1444. "La Biblioteca di S. Marco," 80.

²⁴ The Chapter Room decoration was still incomplete in August 1441. Ugo Procacci, *Mostra dei Documenti sulla Vita e le Opere dell'Angelico e delle Fonti Storiche fino al Vasari* (Florence: Giuntina, 1955), cat. no. 15.

²⁵ The contract signed by the trustees of Niccoli's manuscript collection concerning the construction and maintenance of the library indicates that the name of every user of the library would have been entered into a registry; however, this manuscript apparently did not survive the repeated dispersals of the collection since the early sixteenth century.

²⁶ Cosimo's cell will be discussed more fully below.

and Vespasiano's companion on manuscript purchasing expeditions for the convent.²⁷

Of all the trustee managers of the San Marco collection, Cosimo also served as the primary point of contact for scholars and copyists requesting access to the extant manuscripts. Often these requests were generated by persons of supreme authority, such as Pope Nicholas V, who wrote to Cosimo on behalf of Ioannes Scutariotes, the Greek copyist who wished to have access to the library.²⁸ Before Nicolas assumed the papal throne in 1447, he himself most likely used the San Marco library while he was in Florence, since it was he who created the proposed list of texts that should furnish it.²⁹ His first-hand experience of Angelico's decoration at San Marco most likely contributed to his later decision to patronize the artist at the Vatican.³⁰

Each of the living trustees of Niccoli's collection at the time of its opening must be examined as a potential viewer within the practiced place of San Marco.³¹ Those residing in Florence, including Francesco Lapaccini, Franco Sacchetti, Domenico Buoninsegni and Paolo Toscanelli, had liberal access the collection and were even able to borrow books from it for short periods of time. One of the trustees, Filippo di ser Ugolino Pieruzzi, a distinguished scholar of Greek and Latin, theologian, and author of several of treatises on astrology, geometry and astronomy, was designated as the trustee responsible for the first inventory of the manuscripts at San Marco.³² As such, he knew every volume in the collection.

²⁷ Eugenio Lazzaresci, "Relazioni di Cosimo de'Medici con la Signoria di Lucca," *La Rinascita*, 3 (1940), 187-201. After Vespasiano da Bisticci worked to build up the San Marco library, he was hired by Cosimo to use the collection as the basis for the production of manuscripts for the new library founded by Cosimo at the Badia Fiesolana.

²⁸ Letter published in A. Fabronius, *Magni Cosmi Medicei vita* (Pisa, 1788), II, 22 (doc. 119).

²⁹ Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (hereafter "BNCF"), Conv. Sopp. I, VII, 30, ff. 180-185.

³⁰ Creighton Gilbert, "Fra Angelico's Fresco Cycles in Rome: their Number and Dates," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 38 (1975), 245-265; Gerardo di Simone, "'Velut alter Apelles.' Il decennio romano del Beato Angelico," in *Beato Angelico. L'alba del Rinascimento* (Milan: Skira, 2009), 129-143.

³¹ By the time the library was completed, four of the trustees were deceased: Ambrogio Traversari (d. 1439), Lorenzo de'Medici (d. 1440), Niccolò Gori (d. 1441), and Leonardo Bruni (d. 1444).

³² Vespasiano (da Bisticci), *Le vite*, ed. Aulo Greco (Florence: Istituto di studi sul Rinascimento, 1970), 319.

Many of the library trustees were key figures in the political dynamic of fifteenth-century Florence. Three successive trustees served in the high profile political role of Chancellor of the Republic and each used his political influence to protect the library as an independent site of learning in the city. Although he died before the library was completed, Leonardo Bruni created favorable economic conditions for the Observant Dominican friars in his capacity as Chancellor from 1436-1444.³³ Likewise, both Carlo Marsuppini from 1444 to 1453 and Poggio Bracciolini from 1453 used their influence as Chancellor of the Republic to ensure that the Signoria protected the friars of San Marco, and, by extension, the library itself.³⁴

Poggio Bracciolini served as Chancellor of the Republic in 1453, when he returned to Florence after a long career in the Papal Curia. Poggio had a lifelong commitment to the development of the San Marco manuscript collection, even during his lengthy absences from the city. He collaborated with Niccolò Niccoli for more than three decades on a variety of projects related to the collection's development, from the reformation of script and Latin grammar to the search for particular manuscripts in monastic libraries throughout Europe.³⁵ Poggio produced copies of manuscripts for the library's collection and bequeathed his own collection of Greek manuscripts and copies of the works of Augustine to the convent.³⁶ His commitment to San Marco manifested itself in the conversion of his son, Pier Paolo, who became a friar at San Marco after Poggio returned to the city and began frequenting the convent.³⁷

³³ Lauro Martines has connected several of his actions as Chancellor in the period after the Medici return from exile to a desire to ingratiate himself in the Medici faction. See Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists: 1390-1460* (London: Routledge, 1963), 170. In this manner, one can approach the Signoria's decision in 1436 to transfer the convent of San Marco to the Observant Dominicans "out of respect for Cosimo and Lorenzo" as both a political and personal favor. Likewise, under Bruni's influence, the friars of San Marco received exemption from indirect taxes from the Signoria in 1437. BLF, San Marco 370, f. 9v.

³⁴ BLF, San Marco 370, f. 9v.

³⁵ Poggio's letters to Niccoli often refer to the creation of a public library and are filled with references to Niccoli's collection and to the production of manuscripts for him. See Phyllis Walter Gordon, *Two Renaissance Book Hunters: The Letters of Poggios Bracciolini to Nicolaus de Niccolis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1974).

³⁶ The will was drawn on October 19, 1443 and is published in E. Walser, *Poggios Florentinus: Leben und Werke* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1914), 359-370.

³⁷ BLF, San Marco 370, f. 92r.

Certain other scholars were given privileged access to the San Marco manuscript collection. A letter dated June 15, 1456 places the theologian Guglielmo Becchi at the San Marco library in that year, and suggests that he was a relatively frequent user of the collection.³⁸ The civic humanist Donato Acciaiuoli became familiar with San Marco and its library from an early age.³⁹ There, he studied logic under Fra Angelo da Lecco and debated with other students at the convent, one of whom was his brother Piero.⁴⁰ Niccolò della Luna, the humanist scholar of Greek and Latin, even resided in the dormitory while working on a treatise in 1453.⁴¹

Other individuals had access to the library and its collection, but even the small number of library users identified here reveals that the “public” of San Marco was an elite class of intellectuals and politicians with life goals quite apart from the immediate concerns of the Observant Dominican friars resident at the site. These individuals—university lecturers, heads of government and administrative officials, members of the Curia, lawyers, scientists, notaries and banking merchants—were committed to humanistic learning as a useful tool in contemporary politics. Their identities were bound to their pursuit of knowledge. Thus, the library of San Marco must not solely be seen as a repository of texts placed at the convent as a means to give back to God and to alleviate Cosimo’s guilty banking conscience, but also, and more appropriately, as a laboratory of learning that was intimately connected to the political and social welfare of Florence.

The motivation to create a library at San Marco to house Niccolò Niccoli’s manuscript collection was bound to a desire, first expressed nearly half a century earlier and repeated until the San Marco library was realized,

³⁸ Eugenio Garin, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), 320 n. 3.

³⁹ Vespasiano, *Renaissance Princes*, 279. On “civic humanism,” see Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955; 1966). For a recent reassessment of Baron’s thesis, see *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ Alessandro Gherardi, ed., *Statuti della Università e Studio fiorentino dell’anno 1387, seguiti da un’appendice di documenti dal 1320 al 1472* (Bologna: Sala Bolognese, 1973), 461-462. Donato continued to be connected to San Marco and to the Medici throughout the 1460s, for he became a confraternal member of the *Compagnia de’ Magi* and also provided Cosimo de’ Medici with personal copies of his commentaries on the *Ethics*. See Arthur Field, *The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 4.

⁴¹ John Spike, *Fra Angelico* (New York, NY: Abbeville, 1996), 70.

to construct an independent site of learning in the city that would serve to provide every kind of text from the past and the present to the public; these texts would be offered in their most accurate form and without the interference of corrupted university officials.⁴² That Cosimo de' Medici was able to finance the construction of such a site placed him in a privileged position of leadership in the city. He hand-selected those individuals who were given access to this laboratory of learning, and, through this social dynamic, he actively shaped the politics of the Republic.

The San Marco library became known to a diverse public through descriptions of its architecture and collection that were circulated in humanistic circles and through scholarly access to the convent itself. In the earliest descriptions of San Marco, dating to the mid-fifteenth century, the library was singled out as the most notable architectural feature of the convent. In his *Cronaca* of San Marco, the Observant Dominican friar and cousin of Niccolò Niccoli, Fra Giuliano Lapaccini, praised the library's supreme location, its size and the quantity and quality of the reading benches within it.⁴³ Beyond its beauty and size, the fifteenth-century architectural theorist, Antonio di Pietro Averlino, called Filarete, pointed to the vaulting of the library as its most important architectural feature and to the collection of manuscripts as one of the most worthy in Italy.⁴⁴ Such critical praise for the architectural site reflects both the interest generated by such

⁴² See my discussion of the university system and the varied motivations for creating an independent public library in the late Trecento and early Quattrocento in Florence in Terry, "Politics on the Cloister Walls," esp. Chapter 1, and in Terry-Fritsch, "Spaces of Scholarly Consumption" (forthcoming). In his *De seculo et religione* of 1381, Salutati argued that the public library should act "not only as a place of conversation, but as an office for the reclamation and transmission of texts;" Garin, "La biblioteca di San Marco," 82. Nearly fifteen years later, Salutati continued to write of the need for a public library, where scholars would have access to every type of book in its most correct form. See Coluccio Salutati, *De fato e fortuna*, II, 6, found in the edition by Concetta Bianca (Florence: Olschki, 1985), 47ff. Salutati's desire to found such a library would help to attenuate the problem of corrupted texts (including the problem of scribal errors while copying texts) and the problem of having to learn from ignorant lecturers; see Garin, "La Biblioteca di San Marco," 81-82. For information on Salutati's own library and collecting practices, see Berthold L. Ullman, *The Humanism of Coluccio Salutati* (Padua: Antenore, 1963), esp. 131-259. Ullman noted that Coluccio's ideas were finally put into practice in the library at San Marco; 102.

⁴³ BLF, San Marco 370, f. 6r. Of the five most notable features of the convent, Lapaccini places the library first. His mention of Fra Angelico's paintings is listed third.

⁴⁴ Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture*, trans. John Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale Press, 1985), 321-322.

an innovative design and the desire to have access to its contents, the collection of manuscripts.

Almost immediately, the San Marco library inspired a new genre of architectural patronage in other regions of Italy, and by 1450, patrons and architects initiated library projects in direct emulation of it.⁴⁵ Malatesta Novello di Malatesta of Cesena was in frequent contact with Cosimo and his son Piero, and his letters reveal that he was allowed to borrow books from the San Marco library.⁴⁶ He would later construct the first library to directly copy San Marco in its architecture, decoration, and the scope of the manuscript collection. Such emulation was a clear sign of San Marco's prominent role in facilitating humanistic learning in the fifteenth century. Likewise, the composition of the manuscript collection itself was copied by leading political figures throughout Italy during the fifteenth century. For example, Cosimo sent the inventory list of the manuscript collection to potential patrons outside the city, such as the Duke of Urbino and Alessandro Sforza, so that they could model their own libraries on San Marco.⁴⁷

In his detailed study of the Observant Dominican rituals and practices at San Marco, William Hood noted that the library built to contain Niccoli's manuscripts was in direct conflict with the ideals of the Observant community, and suggested that the strictly humanistic focus of the collection may have contributed to the increasingly poor relations between the religious community of San Marco and its parent convent, San Domenico in Fiesole.⁴⁸ As opposed to the scholarly traditions of the Dominican Order of Preachers, Observant Dominican communities placed nearly no emphasis on humanistic intellectual pursuits.⁴⁹ These friars would have little need for a library representing the most comprehensive collection of Latin and Greek classical authors in fifteenth-century Italy. Indeed, the fact that the trustees had such complete control over the use of the library indicates that it was not, in fact, designed for the friars at all.

⁴⁵ The first library to use San Marco as a model was the Biblioteca Malatestiana di San Francesco in Cesena, patronized by Malatesta Novello di Malatesta and constructed by the architect Matteo Nuti da Fano between 1450-1452. See N. Trovanelli, "Quattordici lettere di Malatesta Novello Signore di Cesena," *La Romagna*, 6 (1909), 30-42.

⁴⁶ Trovanelli, "Quattordici lettere," 30-42.

⁴⁷ Vespasiano, *Le vite*, 46.

⁴⁸ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 38.

⁴⁹ Hood maintains that "for all its treasures Niccolò Niccoli's library was fundamentally irrelevant to the intellectual biases of most Observant Dominicans and to the modest demands they made on their conventual libraries." Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 38.

Practicing the Space

Secular visitors to the San Marco library brought the public life of the urban city into the serene and protected space of the Observant Dominican convent. To access the library, scholars necessarily traveled through the complex and into the residential and devotional areas of the convent (Figs 4 and 5). To understand San Marco as it was practiced by its humanist users, that is, to move as they moved and to see what they once saw, one must reconstruct the place (i.e., the physical configuration of the convent) and then examine the space (i.e., the actualization of the place by the movements and vectors of the humanist users of the library).

When the San Marco library was completed in 1444 and the manuscripts were installed in their proper places, the texts were ready to be consulted. The spectacular impression of the long vaulted room underscored its importance as the first real architectural space designed solely for the consultation and study of books (Fig. 2).⁵⁰ Each aspect of the library's design and layout was intended to facilitate humanistic research and onsite learning. Inspired by the monastic architectural language of such sites as the dormitory of Santa Maria Novella or the Pilgrims' Hospice at Badia di S. Salvatore al Settimo, the library is composed of a central barrel-vaulted aisle framed by an arcade of Ionic columns and flanked on either side by two fenestrated cross-vaulted aisles of lesser height.⁵¹ Lining the side aisles were 64 wooden reading benches installed in two equal rows, to which over 400 manuscripts were attached by chains.⁵² Windows provided light for onsite reading, and the color of the walls, originally a pale shade of green frescoed to emulate marble, helped scholars' eyes to endure long hours of study.⁵³

⁵⁰ The measurements of the library are 45.1 meters by 10.45 meters. For the architecture of earlier monastic libraries, see James O'Gorman, *The architecture of the monastic library in Italy, 1300-1600* (New York, NY: New York University Press for the College Art Association of America, 1972).

⁵¹ For the architectural precedents of the San Marco library, see G. Morozzi, "Restaui nell'ex convento di S. Marco a Firenze," *Bolletino d'Arte*, IV (1955), 350-354.

⁵² In 1657-1658, the benches were replaced by upright cupboards placed along the walls between the windows; Magnolia Scudieri, "La Biblioteca di San Marco dalle origine a oggi," in *La Biblioteca di Michelozzo a San Marco: tra recupero e scoperta* (Florence: Giunti, 2000), 20.

⁵³ Magnolia Scudieri and Giovanna Rasario, *La Biblioteca di Michelozzo a San Marco: tra recupero e scoperta* (Florence: Giunti, 2000).

Architectural changes to the convent have significantly altered the original layout of the dormitory spaces, thus obscuring the original route that the humanists would have taken to reach the library. At the time of its completion in 1444, there were only two ways to access the *primo piano*, neither of which is the grand staircase used by today's visitor to the convent.⁵⁴ The first was via a small spiral stairwell connecting the Chiostrino della Spesa with the basement rooms below and the northeast corner of the dormitory above (Figs 3 and 4).⁵⁵ To access this now destroyed stairwell, one had to travel through the utilitarian spaces of the convent located beyond the semi-public cloister of Sant'Antonino, such as the kitchen (now the Sala di Fra Bartolomeo), the water room (now the Sala del Baldovinetti) or the room for the barber (now the small refectory).⁵⁶ In their architectural analysis of the convent, Antonio Benfante and Paola Perretti determined that the stairwell itself also served a utilitarian function for the friars.⁵⁷ The original water source for the *primo piano* was located in the Chiostrino and the friars could access the well directly from the dormitories by descending the spiral stairwell to a mezzanine level connected to the terrace surrounding the Chiostrino.

By 1443, a second stairwell was constructed in the vestibule between the church and the sacristy (Figs 3 and 4).⁵⁸ One could access the stairwell either through a door in the northwestern corner of the cloister of Sant'Antonino or through a door in the northeastern corner of the church of San Marco, located beyond the tramezzo but before the choir screen, in the space of the laity. Both of these access points were semi-public spaces open to the laity, as opposed to the more intimate and utilitarian spaces surrounding the spiral stairwell in the Chiostrino della Spesa; thus, this second stairwell was positioned well for use by the secular users of the library on the *primo piano*. From this stairwell, one entered the friars' dormitory via a door at the far western end of the northern corridor (Fig. 5). Cosimo de'Medici's personal cell, composed of two connected rooms with

⁵⁴ BLF, San Marco 370.

⁵⁵ Antonio Benfante and Paola Perretti, "I Chiostri e il Museo di S. Marco," in *La Chiesa e il Convento di San Marco a Firenze*, 2 vols. (Florence: Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1989), 1: 310.

⁵⁶ Benfante and Perretti, "I Chiostri e il Museo," 307.

⁵⁷ Benfante and Perretti, "I Chiostri e il Museo," 308.

⁵⁸ The stairwell was completed by 1443, when it was recorded that Pope Eugenius IV spent the night in Cosimo's cell on the occasion of the consecration of the church; BLF, San Marco 370, f. 7r.

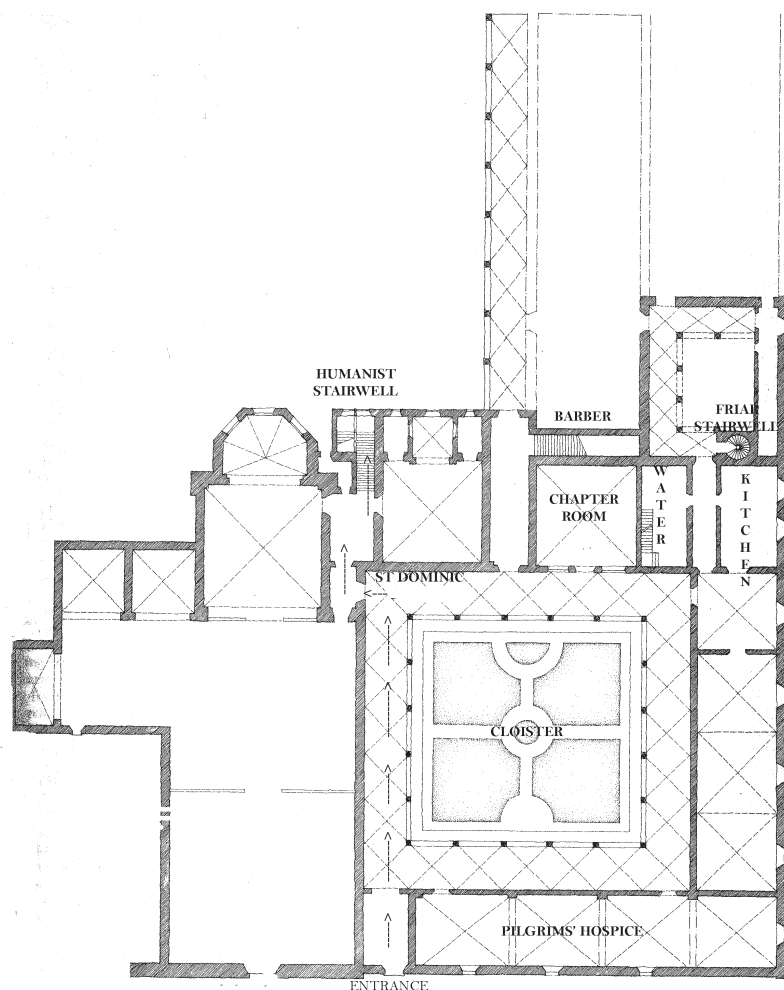


Figure 3. Ground floor plan of San Marco, Florence (map: author).

elaborate frescoes, was located immediately to the left of this entrance and just a short distance from the library.⁵⁹ The original route to the library for

⁵⁹ Hood's hypothesis—argued solely from an idealized notion of Observant Dominican *clausura*—that, from the top of the stairwell, secular humanists traveling to the library would have accessed an exterior terrace lining the northern face of the northern corridor to reach the library cannot be confirmed by any extant documentation nor architectural evidence related to the period of the library's foundation and its use by the original humanist

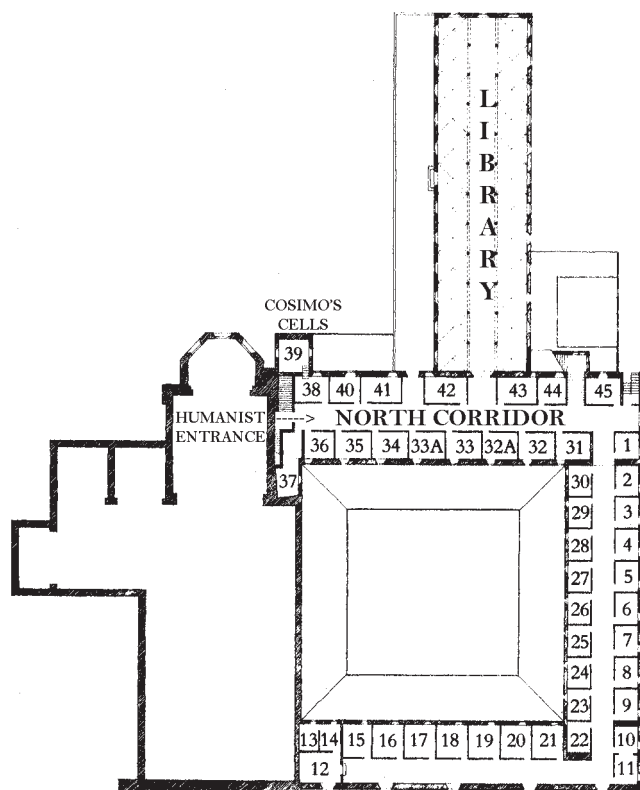


Figure 4. *Primo piano* floor plan of San Marco, Florence (map: author).

secular users was thus from the church or cloister on the ground floor, up the stairwell located in the northwestern vestibule, and then west to east along the northern corridor of the *primo piano* to the library.

The spatial navigation of San Marco by its secular users along this specific route was a rich visual journey, since Fra Angelico and his assistants painted frescos along the entire pathway. On the ground floor, the library user moved toward and under the painted lunettes above the doors leading from the cloister and by a large-scale *Crucifixion with Saint Dominic* (Fig. 6), located in the northwestern corner of the cloister and adjacent to

visitors to the library. Hood himself states that his discussion is only “reasoned hypothesis deduced from scanty evidence;” *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 248-250. See the discussion of this point in Terry, “Politics on the Cloister Walls,” 195-196.



Figure 5. View of secular entrance to the dormitory, with entrance to Cosimo de' Medici's double-room (Cells 38 and 39) on the right, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

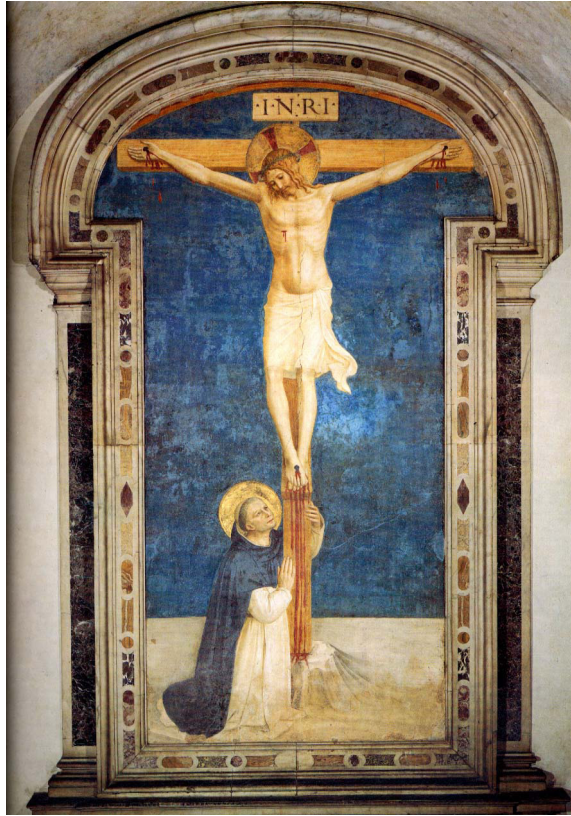


Figure 6. Fra Angelico, *Crucifixion with Saint Dominic*, ground floor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

the doorway leading to the vestibule and stairwell.⁶⁰ From the entrance to the northern corridor of the dormitory, scholars *en route* to the library would have passed at least eleven cells, each of which was decorated with a fresco oriented toward the corridor.⁶¹ According to the Observant

⁶⁰ For an excellent interpretation of the lunette frescoes in the cloister, see Creighton E. Gilbert, "A Sign About Signing in a Fresco by Fra Angelico," in *Tribute to Lotte Brand Philip* (New York, NY: Abaris Books, 1985), 64-70.

⁶¹ I am including in this estimate only those cells in which the frescoes would be fully visible to an individual in the corridor from the stairwell to the library.

Dominican rules for the maintenance of their dormitory spaces, the doors to the individual cells were required to remain open at all times. Thus, each fresco located within the cells would have been visible from the corridor and therefore legible to the humanist observer.⁶² Considering that the library project was already underway before any of the frescoes in the cells of the northern corridor of the dormitory were painted, those images must be considered as designed and executed, at least in part, with a secular humanist audience in mind.⁶³

The frescoed scenes adorning the cells in the dormitory of San Marco do not follow a successive narrative sequence; that is, the biblical events do not unfold linearly as one travels through the dormitory, but rather are presented over both the northern and eastern corridors as scattered glimpses into chronologically diverse moments in Christ's life. However, reading the frescoes as the humanist visitor to the library would have experienced them in succession from west to east, one finds stylistic continuity in the cells framing the western entrance to the dormitory and lining the northern, or library, side of the northern corridor (Figs 7-10). Furthermore, the images located along this "humanist itinerary" are stylistically distinct

⁶² The northern corridor of the convent has received the least amount of attention in art historical literature on San Marco. This may be explained in part due to the pervasive presence of Angelico's assistants in the majority of the cell frescoes in this section of the convent, which, only until the recent interest in the artistic activity of Benozzo Gozzoli, has deterred a serious examination of the decoration's larger significance. For various judgments on the different hands at San Marco, see the overview in Giorgio Bonsanti, *Beato Angelico: catalogo completo* (Florence: Octavo, 1998). For the recent scholarship on Benozzo Gozzoli's presence at San Marco, see Diane Cole Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli* (New Haven, NY: Yale University Press, 1996) and Anna Padoa Rizzo, *Benozzo Gozzoli. Catalogo completo* (Florence: Catini & C. 1992). Ahl has argued for the presence of three hands at San Marco: Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli and an unidentified artist; Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli*, 14. Questions of artistic hands aside, what is important to note is that the decoration in this section of the dormitory was completed after 1441; that is, after the decision to house the library at the convent had already been made. As such, a humanist audience was already assumed for the northern corridor during the period in which Angelico and his assistants painted the cell frescoes.

⁶³ The *Cronaca* records that the northern corridor of the dormitory was erected between 1440 and 1441 and that the decoration was still not complete by 1443; however, there exists no firm terminal date of artistic activity at the site. Fra Angelico continued residence at San Marco through at least July 1445, when he was recorded at an important Chapter meeting between the friars of San Marco and the friars of San Domenico in Fiesole; Proccacci, *Mostra dei documenti*, cat. no. 18; Stefano Orlandi, O.P., *Beato Angelico* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1964), 71.

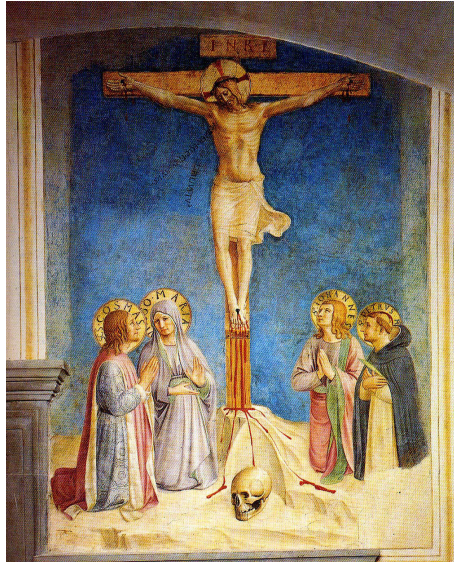


Figure 7. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints*, Cell 38, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

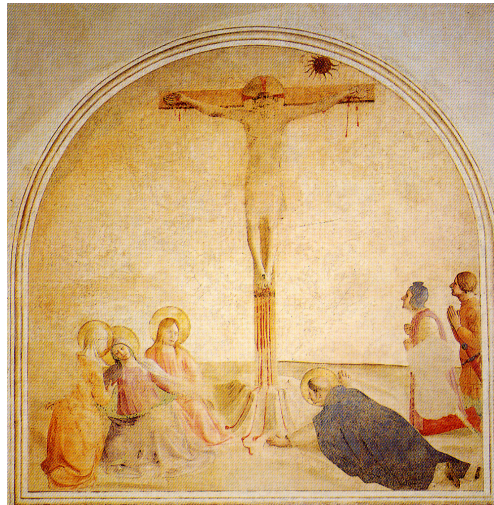


Figure 8. Fra Angelico and workshop, *Christ on the Cross with Saints and Witnesses*, Cell 40, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

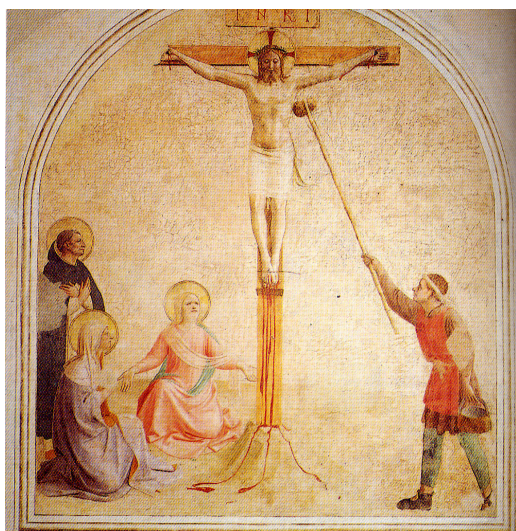


Figure 9. Fra Angelico and workshop, *The Spicing of Christ's Side*, Cell 41, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

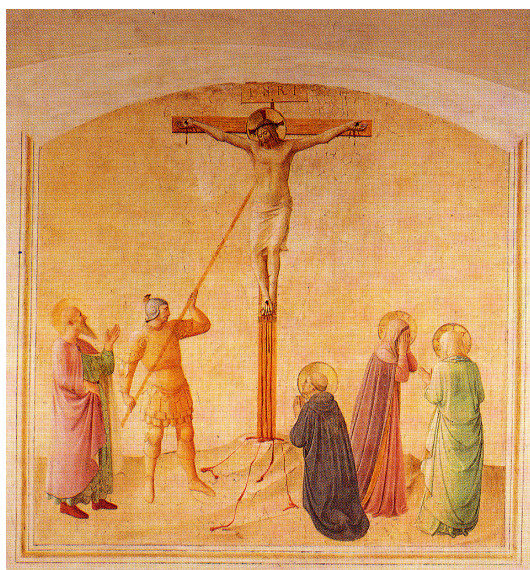


Figure 10. Fra Angelico and workshop, *The Piercing of Christ's Side*, Cell 42, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

from those frescoes that more exclusively served an Observant Dominican audience in the mid-fifteenth century, such as the scenes located in cells on the eastern and southern wings of the dormitory.⁶⁴ In each of the frescoes along the “humanist itinerary,” including those on the ground floor, the viewer was presented with a representation of Christ on the cross, set within a barren environment and attended by saints and other witnesses. The images do not attempt to portray a complete three-dimensional illusion of space. Rather, the figures are confined to a compressed foreground while a vast field of uninterrupted color symbolically indicates the background. The images function as “icons in space:” the painted figures do not seem to be situated within an imaginary space located within their frame, but rather they are pressed against the pictorial surface and appear to emerge away from the painted wall into the real space of the viewer.⁶⁵ This style held particular resonance for the original library users, many of whom collaborated during the ecumenical Council of Ferrara-Florence and were familiar with the theological texts upon which icon theory rests.⁶⁶ Original language editions of these texts, as well as their translations, many of which were translated by the San Marco library trustees and users, were contained within the library.

While the style of the frescoes distinguishes this set of images, the pictorial narrative constructed by a mobile spectator *en route* to the library also conveyed subtle political messages. In addition to the overt devotional content of the imagery, the architectural and decorative program along the “humanist itinerary” articulated Cosimo’s role as the primary financial sponsor of the church and convent, and specifically his role as the founder of the first public library in Italy. Although there are a number of scenarios for constructing the visual experience of the humanist journey through San Marco, two cells on the northern corridor held particular importance for lay scholars: the double-room designed for Cosimo de’Medici (Cells 38

⁶⁴ Allie Terry, “A Humanist Reading of Fra Angelico’s Frescoes at San Marco,” in *Neoplatonic Aesthetics: Music, Literature and the Visual Arts*, eds. Liana De Girolami Cheney and John Hendrix (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004), 115-131.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of “icons in space” in the Byzantine context, see Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, 1976).

⁶⁶ For a consideration of style at San Marco in relation to the Council of Ferrara-Florence, see Allie Terry, “*Meraviglia* on Stage: Dionysian Visual Rhetoric and Cross-Cultural Communication at the Council of Florence,” *Journal of Religion and Theater* 6 (Fall 2007), 38-53.

and 39) and the room designed for the librarian of San Marco (Cell 42). These cells physically framed the short path from the secular entrance to the dormitory to the library, and their wall decoration served to communicate directly to humanist observers. The imagery painted on the walls was on axis with the open doors of the cells and oriented toward the viewer in the hallway. As the itinerant scholar made his way along the northern corridor, he had options for looking while walking or stopping along the way.

The first image encountered by the library users once they arrived on the *primo piano* was a fresco of the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints*, located in the cell on the left side of the northern corridor, that is, the fresco adorning the first of Cosimo de' Medici's two adjoining cells (Fig. 7).⁶⁷ Painted by Benozzo Gozzoli, Fra Angelico's assistant, the image is the only fresco within the dormitory cells to utilize ultramarine blue pigment for the background color field. The color of the image visually and conceptually forges a connection with the frescoes located on the ground floor, including the *Crucifixion with Saint Dominic* that the library user necessarily passed on his way from the courtyard to the stairwell (Fig. 6).⁶⁸ The *Crucifixion with Saint Dominic* downstairs is the complement to the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* in Cosimo's cell. They frame the library-goer's transition from the ground floor to the *primo piano*.

The *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* also immediately situates the secular users of San Marco within the framework of Medici patronage at the site. The fresco is filled with visual cues portraying Medici interests, yet scholars have been hesitant to reflect on the potential significance of the painting in terms of a viewing audience beyond Cosimo de' Medici

⁶⁷ The first of the two rooms, Cell 38, is joined to the second, Cell 39, by a small set of stairs. The two rooms have undergone extensive renovations, therefore impeding a complete understanding of their original appearance. For example, at the present date, the exterior of cell 38 features an ocular opening, as do cells 40 and 41 next to it, presumably for the purpose of allowing light to enter the room from the corridor. However, in its original form, cell 38 may have had a window on its northern wall, located beneath the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints*, therefore eliminating the necessity for the ocular opening. It is impossible to determine whether the original layout of the double cell included an actual second door, which would have allowed Cosimo to have complete privacy in his inner chamber. If so, then Cosimo might have been able to hold private sessions with his humanist colleagues within the cell.

⁶⁸ For the relation between the ground floor frescoes with those in Cosimo's cell, see Terry, "A Humanist Reading," 115–131.

himself.⁶⁹ Secular users of the library had clear visual access to this painting, whether standing in the hallway or within the room itself. The fresco communicated information on multiple levels about the Medici family, its ambitions and social status, as well as the significance of the San Marco project for the city at large.

In the upper two-thirds of the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints*, the outstretched body of Christ on the cross is silhouetted against a bare blue background. Highlights illuminate Christ's chest, ribcage and abdominal muscles, and contribute to the impression that his body is thrusting outward from the flat wooden plank of the painted cross and into the real space of the viewer. Below, four saints are represented kneeling in devotion to Christ in the rocky foreground. The saints are positioned in groups of two on either side of the cross, and a hierarchy is suggested through the figural placement of the Virgin and John closest to the cross and slightly higher than the two saints on the outer edges of the image. The figure of Saint Cosmas, patron saint of Cosimo de' Medici, kneels in profile to the left of the Virgin and presses his hands together in prayer.⁷⁰ The Virgin, dressed in purple robes, assumes the role of intercessor by directly addressing her gaze to the viewer and gesturing to the figures on the viewer's right. There, one sees Saint John, patron saint of Cosimo de' Medici's son Giovanni, kneeling with his hands together in prayer and his head tilted upward toward the body of Christ. The final figure, Saint Peter Martyr, patron saint of Cosimo de' Medici's son Piero, kneels in profile on the far right side of the painting.

From his position on the cross above the four figures, Christ tilts his head downward to communicate with the Virgin and Saint Cosmas. He utters two phrases, represented by two strings of words on the left side of the image, that refer to the moment recorded in the Gospel of John when Christ sees his mother and disciple at the base of his cross and consigns

⁶⁹ The cell is traditionally considered to have been Cosimo's personal spiritual retreat, where he could meditate and pray in isolation from his worldly burdens outside the convent's walls. See the "Life of Giuliano Lapaccini" in Vespasiano, *Renaissance Princes*. The unusual circumstances by which Cosimo, a layman and merchant, was allowed residential quarters within an Observant Dominican convent have been explained traditionally as a form of repayment for Cosimo's largesse at the site.

⁷⁰ The fresco is arguably based on Masaccio's *Trinity* in the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella. See Gene Brucker, "The Florentine Elite in the Early Fifteenth Century," in *Masaccio's Trinity*, ed. Rona Goffen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-42.

them to one another as mother and son.⁷¹ The words are written from the divine position of Christ—that is, written upside down and backwards. However, the phrases recorded in the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* deviate significantly from the biblical text in that, as opposed to a reciprocal acknowledgment between the Virgin and John indicated in the gospel, here Christ encourages his mother to recognize two sons. That is, instead of “Woman, behold your son” and “behold your mother,” as recorded in the Gospel of John, the written phrases within the fresco are “Woman behold your son” and “Behold your son.”⁷² The figures of Saint John and Saint Peter Martyr were acknowledged as the patron saints of Cosimo de’Medici’s sons Giovanni and Piero. Therefore, the words of consignment from Christ, coupled with the gesture of the Virgin toward the two saints on the right side of the image, refer to the Virgin’s divinely sanctioned protection of Cosimo’s children.⁷³ For a humanist viewer looking upon the image either from the corridor or from within Cosimo’s cell, the devotional message of the image referred to the privileged status of the Medici family in relation to Christ and the saints. Should one direct his prayers to the Medici saints portrayed in the image, they, in turn, will communicate them to the Virgin, their familial guardian.⁷⁴ That is, the Medici should be viewed as intercessors.

The close visual similarities of the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* located in Cosimo’s cell and the *Crucifixion with Saint Dominic* on the ground floor below also would have been clear to a humanist viewer *en route* to the library, as would their distinct differences. The Dominican friar’s presence in the cloister *Crucifixion* image was not based on a biblical account but rather served as an image of the founder of the Dominican Order for the other friars, his followers, at the convent (Fig. 6). The representation of Dominic, and a select few other friars of the Dominican

⁷¹ John 19: 25-27.

⁷² The words included in the fresco read: “MVLIER. ECCE. FILIVS. TVVS.” and “ECCE. FILIVS. TV.”

⁷³ Importantly, this fresco does not include the patron saint of Cosimo’s brother, Lorenzo, which John Paoletti has connected to Lorenzo’s death in 1440. See John Paoletti, “Fraternal Piety and Family Power: The Artistic Patronage of Cosimo and Lorenzo de’ Medici,” in *Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ de’Medici, 1389-1464: Essays in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of Cosimo de’Medici’s Birth*, ed. F. Ames-Lewis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 195-219.

⁷⁴ See Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), esp. chapter 3.

Order, was a commonly employed device throughout the San Marco frescoes to facilitate the spiritual meditation of the Observant Dominicans in their daily prayers.⁷⁵ The representation was a vehicle for the self-fashioning of the Dominican friar standing before it; the portrayal of a Dominican witness more freely enabled the friar to conceptually engage with the historical event through gesture and imagination.

The *Crucifixion* located in Cosimo's cell served as a secular counterpart to the *Crucifixion* downstairs (Fig. 7). Instead of Saint Dominic kneeling in devotion below the crucified Christ, Medici saints act as the protagonists in the *Crucifixion* in Cosimo's cell. Intended for the eyes of scholars who moved freely from the outside world into the library located within the inner core of the convent, the Medici saints were clearly legible proxies for Cosimo and the other members of the Medici family. Viewed as a frame to the experience of the entire *primo piano*, the fresco implied that it was Cosimo, not the Observant Dominicans, who governed and protected the spaces of the cells and the library in this northern corridor of the dormitory. Cosimo's daily physical presence within the cell, as well as in the library, reiterated this message in embodied form.

The fresco located in Cosimo's adjoining cell, *The Adoration of the Magi*, also functions as a counterpart to the imagery located on the ground floor (Fig. 11).⁷⁶ Spanning the entire width of the northern wall of the cell, the fresco emulates both the compositional axis and the variety and number of figures featured in the Chapter Room *Crucifixion*, located directly off of the courtyard (Fig. 12).⁷⁷ The composition is similarly oriented on a horizontal axis and over twenty figures are represented in the extreme foreground of the image. However, in place of the primary representatives of the religious orders and the patron saints of San Marco on either side of

⁷⁵ Hood, *Angelico at San Marco*, esp. chapter 9.

⁷⁶ An arched and recessed fresco of the *Man of Sorrows* surrounded by the instruments of his Passion is situated within a niche connected to the lower central edge of the *Adoration* fresco. The frescoed niche was intended as a small altar on which the Eucharist, presumably stored in a small tabernacle inserted in the wall just beneath the fresco, could be displayed. The *Adoration*, therefore, may be classified not only as wall decoration in the dormitory cell, but also as a frescoed altarpiece for liturgical services. See Hood, *Angelico at San Marco*, 251-252.

⁷⁷ There is no trace of a fifteenth-century window in Cell 39. The ceiling of the cell is barrel-vaulted with a modern sunlight inserted into its fabric. These later additions compromise our understanding of the original setting, and have caused certain confusion in the literature.



Figure 11. Benozzo Gozzoli, *Adoration of the Magi*, Cell 39, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

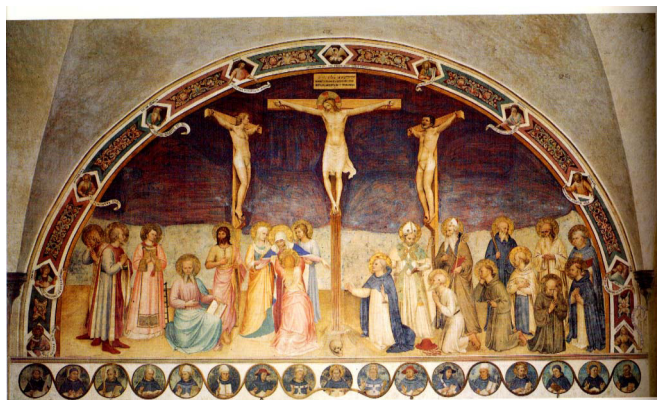


Figure 12. Fra Angelico and Assistants, *Crucifixion*, Chapter Room, ground floor, San Marco. This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

the cross, as featured in the Chapter Room fresco, the *Adoration of the Magi* in Cosimo's cell portrays the three wise men and their entourage being received by the holy family. Like the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* in the preceding room, secular viewers *en route* to the library who had access to this image, whether standing in the corridor or within the room itself, made connections between the imagery and Cosimo's patronage of the library.

Now generally agreed to be largely the work of Fra Angelico's assistant, Benozzo Gozzoli, the San Marco *Adoration of the Magi* is often glossed over by scholars as a predecessor of the monumental wall decoration of the Chapel of the Magi painted by the artist in the Medici Palace over a decade later in 1459.⁷⁸ By that date, the Medici had strategically and firmly established their association with the cult of the Magi in the city.⁷⁹ But in the 1440s, the iconography of the three kings in monumental painting was unusual.⁸⁰ Cosimo singularly asserted his relationship to the Magi despite a distinct lack of a Florentine iconographic tradition. Instead of following custom and consecrating the church on the patronymic feast of Saint Mark, Cosimo arranged for Pope Eugenius IV to consecrate San Marco on 6 January 1443 (the Feast of the Epiphany), and then, through the monumental wall fresco in his cell, he associated himself with the theme in

⁷⁸ Maria Luisa Gengaro, *Il Beato Angelico a San Marco* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano D'Arte Grafiche, 1944).

⁷⁹ Rab Hatfield, "The 'Compagnia' dei Magi," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 33 (1970), 107-161; Allie Terry, "The Benchmark of Kings: The Medici Appropriation of the Cult of the Magi in Quattrocento Florence," (M.A. Thesis, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1998).

⁸⁰ Before the Medici association with the Magi, beginning with San Marco in the 1440s, there was not a strong pictorial tradition of independent altarpieces dedicated to the three kings in Florence. The two primary precedents for Benozzo's decoration at San Marco are Don Lorenzo Monaco's *Adoration of the Magi*, most likely painted for the Portinari family in their burial chapel located in the choir of Sant'Egidio between 1420-1422, and Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*, painted for the Strozzi Sacristy in Santa Trinita in 1423. Both altarpieces were made for banking families, thus providing a critical connection to the Medici. On the patronage of the Portinari, see Osvald Siren, *Don Lorenzo Monaco* (Strassburg: Heitz, 1905), 104-112, and Darrell Davisson, "The Advent of the Magi: A Study of the Transformations in Religious Images," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 1971), 272. While Don Lorenzo Monaco's altarpiece is perhaps the closer of the two images in terms of composition and palette, I argue below that Gentile da Fabriano's piece, and the Strozzi Sacristy in general, were critical influences on the layout of the pictorial program at San Marco.

concrete visual terms. The library users who encountered the image drew on a wide range of social, religious and political references to decipher and interpret its meaning.

Dressed in vividly colored garments in the so-called “Eastern” fashion, the entourage portrayed in the *Adoration of the Magi* enters the scene from the viewer’s right and progresses toward the Virgin and Child seated on the far left of the fresco. Joseph stands erect beside the Virgin and, at his feet, Melchior, the eldest magus, lies prostrate venerating the Christ child. He extends his hand and lips to kiss Christ’s foot in recognition of his divine authority. Balthasar kneels to one side with his arms crossed at his chest and his eyes fixed on the holy family. Caspar, the youngest magus, stands on the other side of Melchior and holds in his hands a large golden pyxis. The retinue of the magi, led by a bearded man in pale green robes shot with pink and yellow highlights, populates the remaining half of the foreground of the painting from the center of the image to the far right edge, where two men on horseback look upwards and to the left presumably in search of the star.

With nearly one half of the pictorial field dedicated to the representation of the three Magi giving gifts to the Holy Family, the San Marco *Adoration* emphasizes the theme of benefaction. The representation of the youngest Magus, Caspar, figures prominently and provides a connection to the patron of the painting, Cosimo. Centrally positioned in the foreground, the young Magus crosses the boundary of his painted frame with his stocking foot and enters the space of the viewer. The only Magus to hold his gift in his hands, Caspar holds his golden pyxis in silhouette against the rocky backdrop. His brocade robes provide a critical connection to Cosimo in that they echo Saint Cosmas’ vestments in the *Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints* in the preceding cell.⁸¹

The figure of Joseph, on the other hand, is portrayed in the act of receiving the Magian gifts. Compositionally distinguished from the other figures in the fresco by the bright light-tan wall behind him and his black *cappuccio*, Joseph peers inside a conical container to examine the first of the gifts. While completing the visual portrayal of the gift-giving process, the figure of Joseph also provides another, not yet discussed reference: in physiognomy and headdress, the representation of Joseph makes direct

⁸¹ Francis Ames-Lewis, “Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi and the early Medici,” in *The Early Medici and Their Artists* (London: Birbeck College, University of London, 1995), 109.

visual allusion to Fra Angelico's portrayal of Michelozzo in the *Deposition* painted for Palla Strozzi and placed within the sacristy of Santa Trinita (Fig. 13).⁸² The allusion would have been understood by the library-going public at San Marco: it was Palla Strozzi, not Cosimo de' Medici, who first set in motion plans for the first public library in Florence, and he intended for the sacristy of Santa Trinita to serve as its entryway.⁸³ Palla's library was never realized due to the dramatic political conflict known as the Albizzi Coup that led to his exile in 1434, but Palla was a key figure in the intellectual circles of the first half of the fifteenth century.⁸⁴ The users of the library at San Marco were on familiar terms with Palla and certainly knew the details of his library plans. The visual quotation of Michelozzo's portrait from Palla's altarpiece draws attention to Cosimo's ability to finish the task, and to do it with both Michelozzo and Angelico.

Furthermore, library users also knew of Palla's patronage of Gentile da Fabriano, who painted an *Adoration of the Magi* for the same sacristy in Santa Trinita (Fig. 14). If *Adoration* imagery was unusual at the time that Cosimo selected it for San Marco, it was even more rare in 1423, the year of the painting's completion. Yet, for a man who was a passionate scholar of Greek language, a friend and benefactor of Manuel Chrysoloras, a reformist of the Florentine Studio, and the most important collector of Greek manuscripts in Italy, the most basic significance of the three Magi as "wise men from the East" would have been seen as a clever autobiographical reference to Palla himself.

According to Matthew's testimony, the three Magi are recognized as the first gentiles to pay homage to the divine authority of Christ; they were ambassadors who came from the outside to legitimate internal power.⁸⁵ Palla's service to the government of Florence was widely known, and he was considered to be a model citizen in his home city and an ideal ambassador in representing Florentine interests abroad. Indeed, the iconography of the young servant depicted in the act of unfastening the golden spur of Caspar in the center foreground of the *Adoration* references Palla's role as

⁸² Giorgio Vasari erroneously associates this portrait of Michelozzo with the figure of Nicodemus; Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Michelozzo," *Lives of the Artists*, 18-19.

⁸³ The library was most likely intended for the *primo piano* of Santa Trinita above the minor sacristy. For a detailed discussion of the relation between the Santa Trinita library plans and the library of San Marco, see Terry, "Politics on the Cloister Walls", 209-222.

⁸⁴ Vespasiano da Bisticci explains that the library project "came to nothing on account of the misfortunes which befell him;" *Renaissance Princes*, 237.

⁸⁵ Matthew 2: 1-12.



Figure 13. Fra Angelico, *Deposition*, Museo di San Marco. This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

Magus-Ambassador: in 1416, Palla was given the title of Knight of the Golden Spur while on an ambassadorial mission for Florence in the southern peninsula.⁸⁶ In this way, the Magi imagery was a convenient means to illustrate his illustrious achievement in politics.

Furthermore, the Magi, as givers of gifts, symbolically represent the act of patronage itself. Palla's sponsorship of the sacristy and his proposal for

⁸⁶ Robert Allan Hatfield, "The Three Kings and the Medici: A Study of Florentine Art and Culture during the Renaissance," 2 vols. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1966), 1:13.



Figure 14. Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

the library project were his only major independent endeavors as a patron of architecture and art.⁸⁷ The benefaction of a library to the public citizens of Florence would have been the crowning achievement of the humanist-banker's already illustrious career. In these interrelated ways of reading Palla's *Adoration of the Magi* to self-fashion his image, Palla emerges as

⁸⁷ Jones, "Palla Strozzi," 41-53.

the wise man, the ambassador and the patron of humanistic studies in Florence.

The users of the library who saw the *Adoration* in Cosimo's cell could easily make similar conclusions about his relationship to an image of the Magi: he was portrayed as the benefactor of wise men, patron of San Marco, and leader of his city. Cosimo was intimately connected with the most prominent humanists in Florence from an early age. By at least 1416, he actively participated in the reorganization and development of the Florentine Studio, financially supported the intellectual interests of Niccoli's circle, and then literally gathered together the leading wise men from the East and the West for the culminating sessions of the Council of Florence in 1438-1439.⁸⁸ His assumption of Niccoli's manuscript collection and the creation of the library of San Marco at last fulfilled the humanistic need for a public institution dedicated to study. Such a site realized an expressed wish of the government for the free and open access to and exchange of knowledge. Cosimo's magnificent generosity shaped a positive political picture of himself within the elite community of library visitors to San Marco.

The legitimization of Cosimo as a serious intellectual and political figure is a central theme of the decorative program at San Marco. In the San Marco *Adoration*, for example, the compositional prominence of Joseph draws attention to the act of legitimization that occurs before him with the gesture of the eldest Magus (Fig. 15). Prostrate without his crown, he reaches with hand and lips to kiss the Christ child's foot as a sign of his recognition of and submission to his authority. Melchior, the first of the wise men to witness and confirm Christ's identity, thus literally leads the entourage of laymen to the divine truth.

Another male figure, almost identical in dress and appearance to the *Adoration* Melchior appears in the fresco of *The Piercing of Christ's Side*, which adorns the last cell before entering the library (Figs 10 and 16). The scene depicts the moment immediately after Christ's death when, while still on the cross, his side was pierced in fulfillment of scriptural prophecy.⁸⁹ Mary and Martha hide their faces in anguish, while a Dominican friar kneels at the foot of the cross. The Melchior figure, recognizable by his

⁸⁸ On the importance of the Council of Florence for Cosimo's patronage at San Marco, see Terry, "Politics on the Cloister Walls," esp. chapter 1.

⁸⁹ John 19: 31-37.

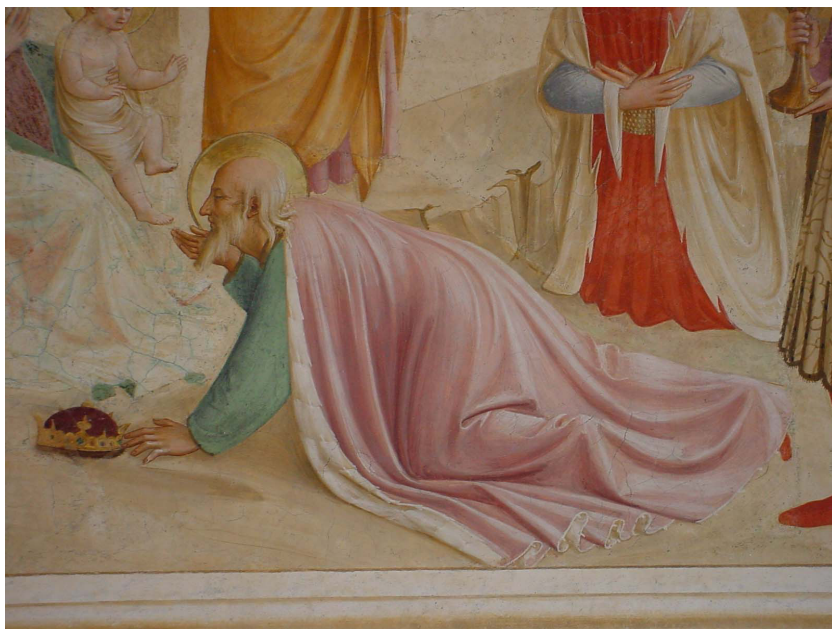


Figure 15. Melchior, detail of Benozzo Gozzoli, *Adoration of the Magi*, Cell 39, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

bald head, beard, and green and fuchsia robes, stands on the far left side, gesturing toward the new wound in Christ's body.

This final scene in the decorative program lining the humanist itinerary is located in a slightly larger cell than those flanking it on the northern corridor. Considering its size, but more importantly its proximity to the library entrance, the room has been plausibly suggested to have once housed the convent's friar librarian.⁹⁰ In the period of the Observant Dominican convent's foundation, this friar was Giuliano Lapaccini, Niccoli's cousin and Cosimo de' Medici's primary agent in organizing and expanding the convent's collection of manuscripts. He may have also

⁹⁰ Hood, *Angelico at San Marco*, 248.



Figure 16. Male figure, detail of Fra Angelico and workshop, *The Piercing of Christ's Side*, Cell 42, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

served as a theological advisor on the artistic program in collaboration with Fra Angelico and the humanist trustees of Niccoli's will.⁹¹

Internal iconographic evidence within the cell's fresco further suggests that the room was to be used by both Observant Dominican and lay-humanist audiences. The inclusion of the figure of a Dominican friar within the frescoes of San Marco has been justly connected to the devotional practices of the Observant Dominican friars at the convent.⁹² They looked to the representation of a Dominican as a means to enter into a biblical scene and to self-fashion their response to it. The "Melchior" figure, however, is unprecedented in the iconography of this scene or in any of the other San Marco frescoes, apart from the *Adoration* in Cosimo's cell. His portrayal in imagery located in key zones of the northern corridor leading to the library suggests that he served as an analogous self-reflexive figure for the laity.

Just as Melchior performs the legitimizing function of acknowledging the Christ child in the *Adoration*, his counterpart witnesses and gestures to the spear entering the side of Christ's body and therefore acknowledges scriptural prophecy in this final scene before the library. The resulting wound in Christ's side later provided the physical proof of Christ's divinity in his resurrected state when the disciple Thomas refused to believe without seeing.⁹³ The Melchior figure, represented in *The Piercing of Christ's Side* as a contemporary witness to the event, marks the wounding as significant by pointing to the act as it happened, whereas Mary and Martha shield their eyes. His ability to comprehend what he sees lends him even greater authority, for just as Melchior led the laity to the Christ child, he now leads the laity to the resurrected Christ. In so doing, his role as a wise man is confirmed.

Furthermore, the repetition of this Melchior figure in the opening and closing scenes of the decoration leading to the library reiterates the Magian association with Cosimo de' Medici, his patronage at San Marco, and the library erected at the site. Framing the layman's experience of the decorative

⁹¹ Hood, *Angelico at San Marco*, 188 and Terry, "A Humanist Reading," 122.

⁹² On the viewing operations fostered by the inclusion of "witnesses" in Fra Angelico's imagery at San Marco, see Allie Terry, "Criminal Vision in Early Modern Florence: Fra Angelico's Altarpiece for 'Il Tempio' and the Magdalenian Gaze," in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, eds. John Hendrix and Charles Carmen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 45-62.

⁹³ John 20: 24-30. See Allie Terry-Fritsch, "Proof in Pierced Flesh: Caravaggio's *Doubting Thomas* and the Beholders of Wounds in Early Modern Europe," eds. Erin Labbie and Allie Terry (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming 2012).

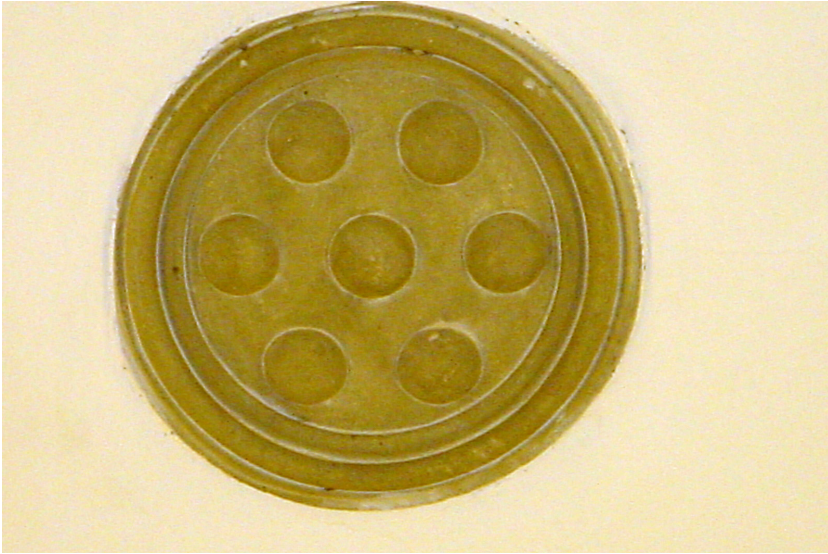


Figure 17. Detail of Medici coat-of-arms, ceiling, Library of San Marco, *primo piano*, north corridor, San Marco (photo: author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/15700674>.

program on the northern corridor, Melchior literally guides the humanist users at San Marco to their fountain of truth, the library. There, beneath of the vaulted ceiling impressed with the Medici coat of arms, the users of the library congregated to study, examine, translate and write the future of the Florentine Republic (Fig. 17). Constructed through connections made by the scholars between the imagery lining the route and the learning that took place in the library, Cosimo de' Medici emerged as key to the future health and harmony of the Republic.

Conclusion

The focus of this study on the “users” of San Marco and their daily operations draws upon Michel de Certeau’s notion of “everyday tactics” in spatial practices.⁹⁴ Tactics, for de Certeau, are the methods of spatial navigation performed by the actual users of spaces; these users are not in

⁹⁴ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

possession of the space, but, nonetheless, they occupy it and maneuver through it according to either pre-established rules or alternative routes.⁹⁵ Through their performance of everyday activities, these users practice the place, and in so doing, they transform it into a social space that must be navigated.⁹⁶ For the art historian, thinking in terms of the tactics of users of spaces allows for the study of architecture in its embodied activation. It acknowledges the “enunciative” function of mobile spectatorship within a built environment, what de Certeau considered a “spatial acting-out of the place” and an articulation of the pragmatic relationships that are implied through movement.⁹⁷

By approaching San Marco as a practiced place, this article considers the secular users of the library as mobile spectators that necessarily navigated the cloister and dormitory. In so doing, it recovers, for the first time, their embodied experience of the architectural pathway and the frescoed decoration along the corridor. The acknowledgement of a secular presence inside the convent’s walls forces art historians to reconsider the ways in which Cosimo’s patronage at San Marco communicated his power to the wider Florentine public and how Fra Angelico’s frescoed decoration communicated his patron’s authority specifically to those who had access to the library. The “ensemble of movements” by the users of the cloister and dormitory set out conditions for viewing the frescoes painted by Fra Angelico and his assistants that lined their walls.⁹⁸ In both frescoed representations and physical presence in his private chambers along the humanist path, Cosimo was presented in the role of humanist benefactor who provided the first public library in Italy, a role that he appropriated to purposefully craft a favorable image of himself. In this way, the Observant Dominican convent may be understood as a place also strategically

⁹⁵ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, xix. Space, considered in terms of tactics, may be understood as a shifting construct of its users, for each individual brings to it his or her own sense of behavioral propriety, spatial memory and lived experience. And yet the spatial field of the renaissance fifteenth-century city must also be understood in terms of strategies, which imposed decidedly collective behaviors on groups of individuals based on the terms set by those in control of the spaces. In this sense, the historian’s task is to seek a “thick description” of space; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

⁹⁶ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

⁹⁷ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 97-98.

⁹⁸ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 117.

practiced by Cosimo, who controlled and governed both the spatial field of the library and the knowledge that was produced inside.

Acknowledgements

This article is part of a larger investigation of Cosimo de'Medici, Fra Angelico and the Library of San Marco that was first explored in Allie Terry, "Politics on the Cloister Walls: Fra Angelico and His Humanist Observers at San Marco," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2005) and is now in preparation as a book manuscript. Support for the archival and onsite research performed for this project in Florence was provided by a Fulbright Fellowship, Pittsburgh Foundation Fellowship, two Hannah Holbern Gray Fellowships, and travel grants from the University of Chicago and Bowling Green State University. I would like especially to thank Charles Cohen, Robert Nelson and Ingrid Rowland for their critical suggestions during my studies at Chicago, and Stefan Fritsch, Stephanie Langin-Hooper, Scott Magelssen and Jolie Sheffer for reading and commenting on drafts of this article during faculty workshops at Bowling Green State University. I am also indebted to the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali for allowing me liberal access to San Marco during the course of this research and for permission to photograph the spaces and images inside the convent.

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